From Death to Life
John 20:1-20
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Tradition has it that when the lions burst through the gates in the Collesium the Christians, huddled together in the presence of a "screaming crowd - in the presence of their own immediate death - used to burst into song: "Praise God from whom all blessings flow: praise him all creatures here below."

In an ancient letter, written by Pliny, govenor of Bithynia, there is a section which records a conversation between a magistrate and a Christian prisoner. The magistrate speaks first:

M: "I will banish thee."

P: "Thou canst not, for the world is my Father's house."

"I will slay thee."

"Thou canst not for my life is hid with Christ in God."

"I will take away thy treasures."

"Thou canst not, for my treasure is in heaven."

"I will drive thee away from man, and thou shalt have no friend left."

"Thou canst not, for I have a friend from whom no man can separate me."

[P. 228, G. A. Buttrick, God, Pain and Evil]

Page 71 of the new Book of Common Worship is entitled, in bold face type, "Witness to the Resurrection", and then beneath, in smaller type, "Funeral Service". The opening words of the service are: "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die." That is to say, at the moment of greatest grief, when people of other cultures are tearing their clothes, smearing themselves with ashes, hiring mourners to scream and wail, or themselves leaping into the burning funeral pyre, Christians are in worship hearing the most optimistic, hopeful words ever uttered. "I am the resurrection and the life."

What, we might ask if we were casual observers, is going on here? Something very strange. These people are acting entirely differently from what our natural inclinations would have us do. These people must know some kind of secret, a

secret that makes all the difference in the world. These people are free from the fear and dispair which clutch the whole human race. These people are at peace, and obviously have something which few men have.

The behavior of all three - the Christians in the Collesium, the Christian prisoner, the Christians in a funeral service - is the result of the truth which we proclaim and celebrate this day: the incredible claim that God's dead son is alive and present in the world.

The story begins very dismally. Jesus Christ was dead, wrapped in linen clothes, in the tomb, with a large stone in the opening. His twelve friends had become eleven. One of them had already taken his own life. They were hiding somewhere in the Passover city, together behind a locked door, perhaps sharing their grief, but more than likely planning to leave the city as quickly and inconspicuously as possible.

Mary - and isn't it typical that a woman put her heart before her head, taking the terrible risks of being seen and identified as one of his followers - Mary went to the garden of Joseph of Arimathea where he was buried, to mourn, to think, to weep, perhaps to annoint the body with preservative oil.

The striking thing about the first part of the Easter story is that none of them expected anything to happen. The faith of the disciples was obviously shattered. All was lost. The one they thought was Lord, was now a dead martyr. And when he appeared to Mary, it was so totally unreal that she failed to recognize him. Later when he confronted the disciples they were incredulous; they didn't want to believe, particularly Thomas who insisted on proof.

Every year, as I go through the Gospel accounts, I am impressed with that. They didn't expect it to happen any more than we would. There is a simplicity, almost a naivete, about the accounts that refutes any suggestion that it was the imaginary creation of some very deluded people. They didn't expect it: They didn't want to believe it. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ burst in on them in total surprise.

Well, something happened to those frightened, desperate people. Something

happened to transform them into courageous ambassadors; fearless heralds of the Good News. They burst from that room with a shout and went out into that city, and from there the whole world, with the message that God's Son who was dead, is alive. Their faith, which was shattered into a thousand pieces by his cruel death, was restored and renewed and deepened. Now they knew what before was only an inclination. Now they knew that he was Lord and Christ and King. Now they knew that nothing would ever separate them from his love.

The transforming event, the Resurrection was central to everything they said and did. The earliest Apostolic preaching, as it is recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, is Resurrection proclaimation; not ethical teaching, not the smooth presentation of a new way of life based on the moral example of a dead martyr, but rough, unsophisticated proclaimation. A headline - not an editorial: Good News, not good advice. God's dead Son is alive! It was so important to them that they shifted the day of worship from the Sabbath to the first day of the week, the day of Resurrection. They greeted each other with the simple phrase, "Christ is Risen." Whenever they gathered for worship, for communion, it was to celebrate that central event - that truth that meant everything to them - their Lord was alive and present with them.

Well, a funny thing has happened to the Resurrection. The central Christian claim as set forth in the New Testament has become quite peripheral. The transforming event has become a doctrinal position, one out of many, locked safely into the second paragraph of a creed nobody takes very seriously.

The Resurrection isn't "in" today and hasn't been for most of this century. The related themes of eternal life, heaven, immortality are also in disrepute, mentioned mostly by those who don't go to church. This is so for two major reasons. First the Resurrection of Jesus Christ is not logical. As an historical event it cannot be documented. The N.B.C. cameras were not on the scene to record the stone rolling away. Not only did no one see it happen, but those who first proclaimed were terribly casual about the details. There are four Gospel accounts and each one is different. None of the early writers seemed interested

in the kind of reasoning that fascinates us; like how did he unwrap the cloths? Now, these were not irrational, ignorant men. They just didn't think in the same way we do.

We have been conditioned to think logically. And it's a good thing, except that somewhere along the line we become convinced that the sole standard of truth is logic. If it can't be understood, it can't be true. If it can't be proved, it didn't happen. Thus our religion becomes a very rational exercise; a way of life, an ethical system. We focus on the Sermon on the Mount and are careful to avoid all those perplexing, New Testament stories that assault our logic. That's the first reason why the Resurrection is no longer central: given our particular presuppositions, it just doesn't make sense.

The second reason is that the Resurrection and the related theme of eternal life and immortality have been put to bad use in the past. Karl Marx said that "religion is the opiate of the masses," and in fact, he was right, when the doctrine of eternal life serves to anesthetize people from the ills of society. That's exactly how the Resurrection was used in slave religion in our own country. The white man's church was an important link in the rotten chain of racism, and it served very well to distract people from their oppression by promising them pie-in-the-sky when they die. So today, the Resurrection is used to distract the churches' attention from the world of human need and suffering.

The natural reaction to that kind of thing is to move in the opposite direction. Get out into the world and die for humanity. Don't even mention the Resurrection: the great promise of the Gospel: become a pious social welfare agency. And either way it gets pretty depressing after a while. It's a little like a cartoon I saw once depicting two prisoners in a cell. The cell is actually a dungeon, 20 feet deep, no windows, no doors. The prisoners are chained to the wall with shackels around their ankles, wrists, and throats. One turns to the other and says, "Now, here's my place."

We need nothing so much as to recover our roots: to return to that New

Testament secret, that we live in a new kind of world, a world in which the Resurrection has taken place. We need nothing so much as the new perspective the Resurrection produces: that we live in an open system where the power of God is ultimate: that the promise of the Gospel is still good: that hope is valid.

Let's think about that briefly. A world in which Resurrection is a reality is a world radically different. From all indications the world we live in is dominated by evil and death. Men die in Viet Nam, Israel and Egypt, children starve in Nigeria and India, children die in hospitals in Lafayette, and on the highways while riding in cars. Evil seems to rule with a power nothing can touch. Personally, our greatest fear, our elemental dread, is of our own eventual death.

John Donne said it well:

"Ask not for whom the bell tolls"

It tolls for thee."

Well, the Resurrection of Jesus Christ is the promise of Almighty God that death is not the last word. Not death but life. Because Christ is risen, we shall live. That good word needs hearing by every man who loves life. Neville Clark, a British theologian said it far better than I could hope to:

"The unfinished tasks we have tried to do, the dreams and hopes and aspirations after which we have striven, the relationships we have vainly sought to perfect and complete, the experiences that have lifted us up and laid us low, moulded us and made us - all these will not be lost or left behind, but will be the notes by which we render harmony to the music of the City of God." [Interpreting the Resurrection, p. 114]

But there is more. Karl Barth once said: "Not only shall we die one day. Death is much greater and much more dangerous than that. It is the great 'no', the shadow that hangs over our human life and accompanies all its movements". [P. 147, Deliverance to the Captives] The New Testament sees death as a power, a demonic force which exists in all men, in their institutions,

their relationships, their dreams and hopes. And the New Testament has the audacity to proclaim that this death - this powerful death principle is now dead. That because of Jesus Christ we have moved from death to life: that God has built into the very structure of the universe the victory of life over death, good over evil. In Jesus Christ, God has said his "Yes" to life.

The trouble with most Easter sermons, and the trouble with this one, is that there is too much to say on one occasion. Easter sermons try to do too much, and for that I apologize. And yet it is a very natural problem. For today we celebrate and observe that central truth, that event which we recall every "First day of the week." I find myself very much in agreement with an editorial which suggested that the Good News of Easter ought to be sung, shouted and applauded rather than discussed. We are here to celebrate what has happened: to rejoice, to be happy and glad in grand style. And I pray that this will be our experience.

There is one final word, however, and for it I would return again to the disciples. Recall again that they didn't expect it; they were reluctant and hesitant and stammering - as if something like this was simply too good to be true. Recall again that their experience with the Risen Christ was preceeded by three long, hard years of obedient discipleship: that Jesus Christ did not appear to a group of strangers but to those who had followed him.

I think there is a sound but difficult lesson in that. The glory of the Resurrection burst into the midst of men who had witnessed the crucifixion, men who had given their lives, men who were disallusioned by the apparent defeat of their Lord, and the negation of their faith. I think you and I have to go that route too. I think it is absurd to expect the Resurrection to mean much apart from committed discipleship. I think it is folly to expect Easter to mean anything other than bunnies and eggs and new hats apart from the continuing life of discipleship. Loosely translated that means that this building will be open next Sunday morning too: that the promise and hope of the Gospel become realities in the lives of people who follow Jesus Christ tomorrow and

and the next day and every day.

From Death to Life. From dispair to Hope. That is the rythm of the Gospel. That is the Good News of Easter. Let us begin today. Let us sing it, rejoice in it, celebrate it. Let us go from here into a new world that has been made radically different. And then let us live every day in security and freedom. We are safe. Christ is Risen.

Amen.

Eternal God, on this day as on no other, our words fail their appointed task. We are grateful for your love, for each other, for a world in which we may live with the Good News of the Resurrection. We are humbly grateful, O God, that our Lord - once dead - is alive.

Amen.